

# Eliza Macloghlin and Alfred Gilbert's 'Mors janua vitae'

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FOR THE PURPOSE of this article, the story of Eliza Macloghlin starts with the death of her husband in 1904. We know very little about Dr Edward Percy Macloghlin, aside from that he was the son of a surgeon and that he passed through University College, Liverpool, winning the Bligh gold medal in anatomy in 1882 and afterwards settling in Wigan. According to his obituary in the *Wigan Observer*, 'For some time he had been out of health, and his death at the comparatively early age of 45 is sincerely regretted. Dr. Macloghlin leaves a widow, a daughter of Mr. Millard, of Wigan'.<sup>1</sup>

For most Victorian and Edwardian women of the middle and upper classes 'widowhood was a final destiny, an involuntary commitment to a form of social exile'.<sup>2</sup> For Eliza Macloghlin (1863–1928), however, the death of her husband inspired a burst of creative energy. She wrote an unpublished collection of poems, *Sir, What are these?*, as her husband was dying, and commissioned a sculpture, *Mors janua vitae* (Fig. 28), as a monument to their relationship. The first page of the collection includes the phrase that would later be used for the title of the sculpture:

O insatiable death . . . 'Shoo!' . . . O  
Insatiable . . . 'Aroo! Mors janua vitae! Mass me!'<sup>3</sup>

Despite Edward Macloghlin's unexceptional career, his widow was determined to preserve his memory – and her own – at one of the most illustrious medical institutions in the world: the Royal College of Surgeons of England in London. During his lifetime Edward Macloghlin had only a limited relationship with the College: he became a member in 1884, but was never made a fellow. (The College did not produce an obituary for him, an honour reserved for fellows.) Nonetheless, following his death Eliza founded several scholarships in her late husband's name to assist young men seeking to qualify as members of the College. She also solicited one of the most eminent contemporary sculptors, Alfred Gilbert (1854–1934), to create a monument, which she gave to the College. It was while working on *Mors janua vitae* that Macloghlin and Gilbert conducted a passionate affair; when it turned sour, the sculpture was left unfinished. This article presents new information from the

archives of the Royal College of Surgeons and the Royal Academy of Arts concerning one of Gilbert's most significant yet perplexing works.

*Mors janua vitae* (translated as 'Death, the Gateway of Life' or 'Death, the Gateway of Eternal Life') started as a plaster model that was exhibited at the Summer Exhibition of the Royal Academy in 1907 (Fig. 29). According to the artist, the work was intended to be exhibited 'without identity', 'merely as a subject illustration in portraiture'. Macloghlin, however, divulged the identity of the sitters to a mutual friend, the art critic Marion Harry Spielmann, prompting Gilbert to write to Spielmann pleading that he not make the information public.<sup>4</sup> The plaster model was given by Eliza, at Gilbert's original suggestion, to the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, and a reproduction in bronze was presented, also by Eliza, but this time without Gilbert's permission, to the Royal College of Surgeons. That different versions of *Mors janua vitae* are on display in an art gallery and a medical institution illustrates the way in which this sculpture sits at a strange intersection between medicine and art. Moreover, the presence of *Mors janua vitae* in the inner hall of the Royal College of Surgeons was the result of Eliza's strategic patronage, which goes some way to explain the incongruity of the work among the painted and sculpted portraits of eminent surgeons on display there.

Both versions of *Mors janua vitae* feature life-size half-length portraits of Edward and Eliza Macloghlin, arm-in-arm, cradling a small casket. The figures rest on top of a pedestal comprising a horizontal frieze, three vertical panels and four columns. In the bronze version of the sculpture, which was produced for Eliza by the sculptor Albert Toft, the figures surmount a rectangular red marble base, upon a green marble pedestal and cornice; four green marble columns connect the pedestal and cornice, each with a bronze capital and base.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the classical marble busts of famous past surgeons on display at the College, *Mors janua vitae* is distinctive in its bronze decorative detailing and 'fantastic medieval or Renaissance costume'.<sup>6</sup> Stepping out of the panel on the right is Eros, depicted by Gilbert as a female nude wearing an elaborate headdress; while Anteros,

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<sup>1</sup> 'Death of Dr. E.P.P. Macloghlin', *Wigan Observer* (23rd April 1904), p.5f.

<sup>2</sup> P. Jalland: *Death in the Victorian Family*, Oxford 1996, p.231.

<sup>3</sup> E. Macloghlin: 'Sir, What are these?' (unpublished poem), 1905–1928, Royal College of Surgeons of England, London, MS0126/1.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Alfred Gilbert to Marion Harry Spielmann, 11th June 1907, Royal Academy of Arts, London, SP/7/64.

<sup>5</sup> Detailed descriptions of the work can be found in: R. Dorment: 'The Loved One: Alfred Gilbert's "Mors janua vitae"', in A. Staley, ed.: exh. cat. *Victorian High Renaissance: George Frederick Watts 1817–1904, Frederic Leighton 1830–96, Albert Moore 1841–93, Alfred Gilbert 1854–1934*, Manchester (City Art Gallery), Minneapolis (Institute of Arts) and New York (Brooklyn Museum) 1978–79, pp.43–44; R. Dorment: *Alfred Gilbert*, New Haven and London 1985, pp.249–58; and C. Corbeau-Parsons in M. Droth, J. Edwards and M. Hatt.: exh. cat. *Sculpture Victorious: Art in the Age of Invention, 1837–1901*, New Haven (Yale Center for British Art) and London (Tate Britain) 2014, pp.404–07, nos.128 and 149.

<sup>6</sup> Dorment 1978–79, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.43.



28. *Mors janua vitae*, by Alfred Gilbert. 1908. Bronze, marble and wood, 214 by 123 by 62 cm. (Royal College of Surgeons of England, London).

the god of requited love or a symbol of pure ennobling love, steps back into the panel on the left. (Anteros is also the subject of Gilbert's most visible and controversial sculpture, that in Piccadilly Circus, London, popularly referred to as 'Eros'.) In the pedestal's central panel there is an earth-bound angel, possibly a younger version of Gilbert's *Mourning angel* (1877; Tate, London), while two faces kiss at the angel's feet. The central angel's ankles are bound with what appears to be barbed wire, suggesting an aggressive, even violent intertwining – a visual reference, perhaps, to Gilbert's and Macloghlin's painful entanglement.

Eliza Macloghlin professed that Edward 'was an atheist: and so am I – an atheist'.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore possible that Eliza commis-

sioned *Mors janua vitae* in order to preserve the couple's likeness in a professional medical institution rather than on consecrated ground. The architectural historian Joseph Sharples has noted that the phrase '*Mors janua vitae*' became popular at the beginning of the twentieth century because it invoked both Christian descriptions of the afterlife and Roman paganism without quoting any specific text.<sup>8</sup> The phrase had been used by Joseph Noël Paton for the title of his 1866 painting of a Christian knight being welcomed into the light of paradise by an angel (private collection), as well as by Harry Bates for his statue of the winged angel of death ushering a female nude into the underworld, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1899 (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).



29. *Mors janua vitae*, by Alfred Gilbert. 1906–07. Tinted plaster and wood, height 208 cm. (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).

*Mors janua vitae* incorporates no overt religious symbolism but is replete with winged entities that oscillate between angels and insects. Two embracing angels lie on top of the casket, from which two cherub heads emerge. Eliza wears a cap-like bonnet with folded wings, which unfurled might look like Perseus' winged helmet in Gilbert's sculpture *Perseus arming* (1881–83; Tate, London). Her 'insect-like appearance' is further suggested by two small lumps on her bonnet in the place of antennae and recalls that of the helmet of St George in Gilbert's scheme for the tomb of the Duke of Clarence and Avondale in the Albert Memorial Chapel at Windsor Castle (1891–96).<sup>9</sup> Below Eliza and Edward, putti dance across the frieze, transforming into insects as they process. These angels-turned-insects reflect a tension that is expressed throughout the work between immortality and decay, heaven and earth, a divine, eternal love and a murkier, earthbound one.

In her will Eliza left the College very specific instructions about *Mors janua vitae*.<sup>10</sup> She directed:

My body is not to be clad in any ordinary shroud but is to be completely veiled with the white silk crepe veil which I have for the purpose and which will be found in the Casket which I keep by me for the purpose of holding my ashes after the cremation of my body.<sup>11</sup>

Her ashes were to be 'conveyed to the Royal College of Surgeons', where they would be 'allowed to mingle' with those of her late husband 'contained in the Bronze casket of "*Mors janua vitae*", the work of Alfred Gilbert'. The casket at the heart of *Mors janua vitae*, Eliza instructed, was to be opened with one of two keys: one kept with her will and testament; the other kept by the secretary of the College. After her ashes were added to those of her husband, the urn was to be secured and the lid locked for 'all future time'. The two keys were then to be destroyed, and Eliza's name and date of death engraved on the pedestal of the sculpture. According to records in the College archives, her instructions were carried out, and this is confirmed by the fact that her name and the date of her death are engraved on the right side of the sculpture's pedestal. Hence, *Mors janua vitae* is both a work of art and a cinerarium.<sup>12</sup>

Like the 'white silk crepe veil' in which Eliza was cremated, the casket containing the comingled ashes of husband and wife makes a macabre association between marital union, wedlock, reproduction and death. Eliza and Edward cradle the casket as though it were a child, leading Rudolf Dircks to speculate in the *Art-Journal* at the time of the sculpture's first exhibition that 'the two embracing figures holding the casket suggest – and the idea is a beautiful one – that they have become united by a common affliction, by possibly the death of their children'.<sup>13</sup> Just below the couple's interlocking hands, the sleeves of their robes form a womb-like cavity in which strange, indecipherable shapes produce a primordial foetus. This aspect of the sculp-



30. *Charity* by Alfred Gilbert. 1899. Bronze, height 38.1 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

ture recalls Gilbert's slightly earlier *Charity* (Fig.30), with its two children arranged as though they are ensconced within a fabric womb. Even the sculpture's title invokes the circularity of birth, death and rebirth.

*Mors janua vitae* also recalls paintings by Ford Madox Brown that address the themes of family unity and disunity, reproduction and death. '*Take your son, sir*' (Fig.31) is an unfinished picture of a mother presenting her child to a man whose reflection is seen in the mirror behind her. Marcia Pointon has observed that the cradle to the woman's left resembles a shroud, and the crumpled clothing surrounding the child, a uterus. These visual allusions, Pointon argues, are in keeping with the frequency of imagery in art and literature which 'juxtaposes or conflates urns and wombs, death and birth'.<sup>14</sup> By contrast,

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Eliza Macloghlin to the Royal College of Surgeons, 8th June 1904, Royal College of Surgeons, London, RCS-SEC/70.

<sup>8</sup> J. Sharples: 'Harry Bates's "*Mors janua vitae*"', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 149 (2007), pp.836–43, esp. p.838.

<sup>9</sup> J. Edwards: *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism: Gilbert amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones*, Aldershot and Burlington 2006, p.183.

<sup>10</sup> Will and testament of Eliza Macloghlin, codicil dated 28th May 1913, Royal College of Surgeons, London.

<sup>11</sup> Cremation was legalised in England in 1885 but remained a contentious practice in Britain well into the twentieth century, see J.S. Curl: *The Victorian Cel-*

*ebration of Death*, Newton Abbot 1972, rev. ed. Stroud 2000, pp.176–93; K.R. Hammerschlag: 'The Gentleman Artist-Surgeon in Late Victorian Group Portraiture', *Visual Culture in Britain* 14 (2013), p.166; and N.R. Marshall: "'A Fully Consummated Sacrifice upon Her Altar'", *Victorian Studies* 56 (2014), pp.458–69.

<sup>12</sup> It is described as both 'a grave' and 'a precious Work of Art' in "'Observables" at the Royal College of Surgeons 10: "*Mors Janua Vitae*", *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England* 3 (October 1948), p.221.

<sup>13</sup> R. Dircks: 'The Royal Academy Exhibition, 1907', *Art-Journal* (July 1907), p.207.

<sup>14</sup> M. Pointon: 'Interior portraits: women, physiology and the male artist', *Feminist Review* 22 (Spring 1986), p.18.



31. 'Take your son, sir', by Ford Madox Brown. 1851–92. Canvas, 70.5 by 38.1 cm. (Tate, London).

Brown's *The last of England* (1852–55; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery) is a migration scene with a close-knit family group depicted prominently in the painting's foreground. Brown binds together the husband, wife and small child as they leave England in much the same way that Gilbert binds Eliza to her deceased husband in *Mors janua vitae*, both works serving to reaffirm family unity in the face of different forms of leave-taking.

One can only imagine the complexities involved for Gilbert in sculpting a memorial to the dead husband of his lover. Macloghlin first met Gilbert in 1905, when she commissioned

*Mors janua vitae*. The following year Gilbert modelled a portrait bust of her, of which six copies were made (Fig.33).<sup>15</sup> According to Richard Dorment, Gilbert and Eliza grew close thanks to Gilbert having been legally separated from his wife in 1904. Their relationship inspired Spielmann to compose a poem titled 'E.M. – A.G. 1905–1908'.<sup>16</sup> It starts by describing Eliza as a beguiling *femme fatale*, 'Enchantress of a genius!', but then goes on to thank her for inspiring Gilbert the 'genius' through her love of art:

Mark how a sweet-willed woman, passionate for Art –  
A passion exquisite and deep – a love sublime –  
Called forth responding passion on the artist's part  
Lifting him back to heights he would no longer climb.

Spielmann describes Eliza as Gilbert's 'friend to help, to serve his magic hand'. And yet the references to Eliza's passion for art, her 'love sublime', double as references to Eliza and Gilbert's passion for each other. Gilbert reportedly planned to include a box in Eliza's sculpted head for his own ashes.<sup>17</sup> When the affair between Eliza and Gilbert ended in 1908, the sculpture was not quite finished. Eliza wrote to the President and Council of the College: 'His regard for me created a masterpiece' and 'our sculpture is unfinished for a symbol, because I could get Alfred Gilbert no further'.<sup>18</sup> She is reported to have thrown stones at Gilbert's studio windows to make him release the sculpture when he refused to relinquish it.<sup>19</sup>

There is indeed a sense of incompleteness about the work, an observation corroborated by the artist's complaint in a letter to the Royal College of Surgeons that the sculpture was 'made from an unfinished model'.<sup>20</sup> In the plaster version in Liverpool, bodies – or, rather, body parts – emerge out of and disappear into rough surfaces, which are made to resemble the original clay. It is painted black and white, producing a striking visual contrast between the darkness of the figures' clothes and the lightness of their faces and hands. At the points at which the bodies meet, the sculpture becomes messy, especially in the case of the strange clay-like mass between the heads of the husband and wife, and where the wife's left hand disappears into her husband's robe on the reverse of the sculpture. Although it was common for Gilbert to retain a sense of the unfinished about his works, especially during the second half of his career, here it may also denote the souring of Gilbert's and Eliza's relationship.

Eliza's persona, as conveyed through the prism of her relationship with Gilbert, oscillates between devoted widow and beguiling madwoman – two gendered Victorian stereotypes. In biographies of Gilbert, Eliza is described as 'breath-takingly beautiful', 'mad' and 'a highly emotional and sensitive woman'.<sup>21</sup> The historian Pat Jalland explains that widows were expected to endure their grief with quiet religious resignation: 'Women were trained from an early age to sublimate feelings like anger through the channel of religion, and during widowhood they had abundant time to work through such responses in prayer and religious contemplation'.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in a sense Eliza represents the archetypal Victorian widow: like Queen Victoria,

<sup>15</sup> Eliza presented one copy to the Tate Gallery, London, and another to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, and the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne each has a cast. One went missing from the Musée du Louvre, Paris, during the Second World War, see R. Dorment, ed: exh. cat. *Alfred Gilbert: Sculptor and Goldsmith*, London (Royal Academy of Arts) 1986, p.188; and Corbeau-Parsons, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.407, note 13.

<sup>16</sup> M.H. Spielmann: 'E.M. – A.G. 1905–1908' (unpublished poem), Royal

Academy of Arts, London, SP/17/33.

<sup>17</sup> Dorment 1978–79, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.46.

<sup>18</sup> Eliza Macloghlin to the President of the Royal College of Surgeons, 23rd April 1909, Royal College of Surgeons, London, RCS-SEC/39.

<sup>19</sup> Dorment 1978–79, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.189.

<sup>20</sup> Alfred Gilbert to the Secretary of the Royal College of Surgeons, 26th July 1909, Royal College of Surgeons, London, RCS-SEC/39 (22).



32. Eliza (Millard) Macloghlin. 1904. Photograph, dimensions unknown. (Greater Manchester County Record Office, GB124.DPA/2374/3).

33. Mrs Macloghlin, by Alfred Gilbert. 1906–07. Bronze on marble base, 43.8 by 21.6 by 19 cm. (Tate, London).



she was devoted to her husband to the last. In a photograph of 1904, she appears in full mourning, resting her hand on her heart (Fig.32). At the bottom of the photograph she has written 'Faithfully, Eliza Macloghlin, 1904'.

This perfect Victorian image of devotion, however, belies a more complex and difficult reality. Having spent much of her later life in mental institutions, Eliza committed suicide on 1st May 1928 in Ticehurst Asylum, Sussex. Her suicide note reads: 'Dear Dr. Mc. Dowell, I am putting an end to my sufferings on earth – and the cost of living in an Asylum'.<sup>23</sup> Gilbert Miles of the East Sussex Constabulary reported that Eliza Macloghlin, '(Widow aged 66)', had been received at Ticehurst on 20th April 1928, having previously been a patient there from July 1926 to June 1927. 'The history sheet of this woman', stated the constable, 'shows she has been in numerous mental homes at different times'.<sup>24</sup> The coroner's report found Eliza's death to have been 'Suicide by poisoning by taking carbolic acid whilst of unsound mind'.<sup>25</sup>

It is tempting to dismiss Eliza as a madwoman pacing around in the back-story of a well-known male artist. However, *Mors janua vitae* also presents fascinating evidence as to the complexities of Victorian widowhood as it was experienced by the woman who commissioned the work. To ensure that the sculpture would remain *in situ* at the Royal College of Surgeons,

Eliza offered to finance the installation of Piastraccia marble floors in the College at a cost of £650 on the condition that *Mors janua vitae* 'shall remain undisturbed for ever in the place where the President Sir Henry Morris and Council allowed it should stand'.<sup>26</sup> When the College secretary, Forrest Cowell, suggested the impossibility of ensuring that future councils would never move the sculpture, Eliza insisted that her signature be inscribed on one of the marble slabs on the floor beneath it, thereby ensuring that the sculpture would remain there forever.<sup>27</sup> As reported in the *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*, she requested that 'in the corner to the right of "Mors janua vitae" might be engraved "in letters as small as possible" – "This marble floor to the Royal College of Surgeons from Eliza Macloghlin, 1911"'.<sup>28</sup>

The sculptural and artistic programmes of professional institutions are often dismissed as staid. The prominent position of *Mors janua vitae* in a hallowed medical institution was, however, the result of the manoeuvres of a widow who committed suicide in a mental asylum. She is currently the only woman represented in the vestibule of the Royal College of Surgeons. Her presence – as a portrait bust, literal bodily remains and a hidden signature inscribed in the marble floor – has left an indelible mark on the College and vividly inserts in the institution's history the messy human elements of love, passion and death.

<sup>21</sup> Dorment 1985, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp.249 and 254.

<sup>22</sup> Jalland, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.242.

<sup>23</sup> Coroner's inquest papers for Eliza Macloghlin, 3rd May 1928, East Sussex Records Office, The Keep, Brighton, SHE 2-7-346-07.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, SHE 2-7-346-12.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, SHE 2-7-346-11.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Eliza Macloghlin to the President and Council of the College, 8th May 1911, Royal College of Surgeons, London, RCS-SEC/70.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Eliza Macloghlin to Forrest Cowell, 14th May 1911, Royal College of Surgeons, London, RCS-SEC/70. In 2017 the inscription was temporarily revealed during building work.

<sup>28</sup> 'Observables', *op. cit.* (note 12), p.222.